

# Research Highlights

## Guns in the Family: Firearm Storage Patterns in U.S. Homes with Children

**M**any children in the United States have access to firearms in their homes, and the consequences can be tragic. Recent headlines tell a sad and increasingly familiar story: "Boy charged with attempted murder in shooting of 14-year-old girl," "Boy, 4, shot by 6-year-old," "Just a routine school shooting...." Public health agencies, organizations representing children, and groups representing firearm owners offer consistent guidelines about how to store firearms to make them inaccessible to children: unload them, lock them up, and store them separately from ammunition. However, a RAND analysis of data regarding firearm ownership and storage patterns found that of the families in the United States with children and firearms, fewer than half store their firearms unloaded, locked, and away from ammunition.

Using nationally representative data from a large interview survey by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), RAND researchers examined the prevalence of firearms in U.S. homes with children under 18 years old and learned how those firearms are stored.<sup>1</sup>

### Firearms Are Common in Homes with Children

Thirty-four percent of children in the United States (representing more than 22 million children in 11 million homes) live in homes with at least one firearm. In 69 percent of homes with firearms and children, more than one firearm is present.

The likelihood that families will own a firearm varies by the family's composition, income level, race/ethnicity, region of the

country, and other factors. For instance, families that include an adult man are more likely to have firearms than families with only adult women (41 percent versus 12 percent); white families are more likely than other ethnic groups to own firearms (43 percent versus 16 percent for African Americans, 15 percent for Hispanics, and 16 percent for all other ethnic groups); and families in the South are more likely to have firearms than those in other parts of the country. Rifles are the most common firearms in homes with children, followed by shotguns, handguns, and finally, all other types of firearms combined.

### Many Firearms Are Accessible to Children

Although the debate over gun control and gun rights seems intractable, all sides generally agree that firearms in the home should be stored in a manner that keeps them out of children's hands. However, many firearms are dangerously accessible. Using information about firearm and ammunition storage patterns, the researchers sorted households with children and firearms into six categories, ranging from the least accessible storage pattern (firearms stored in a locked place or secured with a trigger lock, unloaded, and away from ammunition) to the most accessible (firearms are stored unlocked and loaded). The figure on the back shows these storage patterns for U.S. homes with children and firearms.

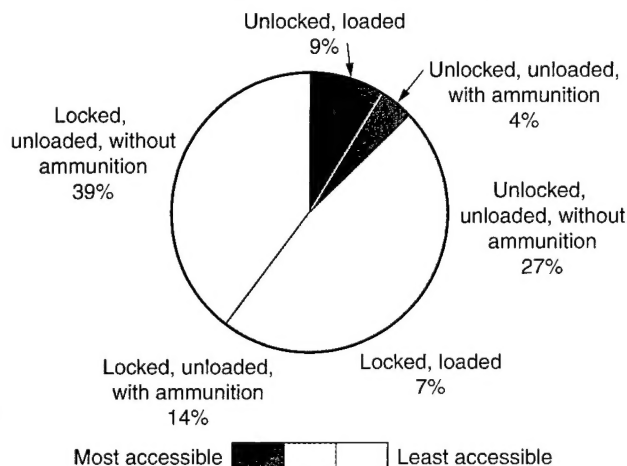
The data show that many firearms in homes with children are dangerously accessible. In 9 percent of homes with children and firearms, at least one firearm is stored unlocked and loaded, and in another 4 percent at least one firearm is unlocked, unloaded, and stored with ammunition. This means that in about 13 percent of homes with children and firearms—about 2.6 million children in 1.4 million homes—firearms are

<sup>1</sup> Schuster, Mark A., Todd M. Franke, Amy M. Bastian, Sinaroth Sor, and Neal Halfon. 2000. "Firearm Storage Patterns in U.S. Homes with Children." *American Journal of Public Health* 90(4):588–594.

20010510 055

### Many Firearms, While Stored, Are Accessible to Children

Percentage of homes with firearms and children in which firearms are stored as indicated



stored in a way that makes them most accessible to children. Overall, fewer than half of the U.S. families with firearms and children store firearms locked (either in a locked place or secured with a trigger lock) and separate from ammunition.

Just as families in the South are more likely than those in other regions to own firearms, they are also more likely to store firearms in a manner that makes them accessible to children.

Trigger locks—devices that prevent a trigger from being squeezed and therefore prevent a firearm from being fired—are at the heart of some recent gun control debates, and at least

one state requires firearms dealers to also offer trigger locks. The NCHS data allowed RAND researchers to examine the prevalence of trigger locks in U.S. households. In 38 percent of homes with children and firearms, at least one firearm is equipped with a trigger lock or other locking mechanism.

### Changing the Patterns

Various strategies have been proposed to prevent children from gaining access to and using firearms that are stored in homes. Some states and cities have passed laws that hold the owner of a firearm criminally responsible when a child injures or kills someone with that firearm. Other strategies involve mandating the use of trigger locks or requiring firearm manufacturers to make “personalized” firearms that can only be fired by authorized users.

The issue of firearm violence is increasingly viewed as a public health issue. Accordingly, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American College of Physicians have recommended that physicians play a role in making firearm storage safer by discussing firearm-related issues with their patients and their patients’ parents. Studies show that although parents are receptive to advice from their children’s doctors, few U.S. physicians provide counseling on firearm safety.

Families will ultimately decide what is best for their own circumstances. However, clinicians, public health workers, and lawmakers can make sure that when families make these decisions they understand the risks associated with firearms and know how to reduce those risks.

*This highlight is cosponsored by RAND Health and the RAND Child Policy Project. Abstracts of all RAND Health documents may be viewed on the World Wide Web (<http://www.rand.org/organization/health>). RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND Health furthers this mission by working to improve health care systems and advance understanding of how the organization and financing of care affect costs, quality, and access. The Child Policy Project provides easier access to objective information that will help improve policy and decisionmaking on children’s issues. RAND® is a registered trademark.*